



A Simple Exercise of Forensic Linguistics Might Have Prevented Psychological Pain

Tharwat M. EL-Sakran

English Department, American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Received: 20 Aug. 2015, Revised: 02 Oct. 2015, Accepted: 08 Nov. 2015, Published: 01 (January) 2016

Abstract: This brief report presents a simple exercise on how forensic linguistics knowledge can be used to reveal the authenticity of some unknown malicious messages/texts. The anonymous text is compared against similar texts produced by the same institution that purportedly dispatched the text. Results show clear differences between the documents compared in terms of style and structure, and demonstrate that the questioned text could not have been written by the same academic institutions.

Keywords: Forensic Linguistics, Anonymous Texts.

1. Introduction

Copious studies have been published on forensic linguistics and its role in attesting authorship of different spoken and written genres (Coulthard, 2010; Gibbons, 2003; Toolan, 2009; etc.). Albeit the abundance of such studies, the richness of the forensic linguistics field and its contributions to the legal system, the present writer is unaware of any study that has attempted to probe into the torture and the insurmountable spiritual and psychological pain inflicted on the person(s) wrongly and falsely accused of tampering with official documents or falsifying and faking them.

2. Cultural Background

Some people in some third world countries do not very much like it or feel comfortable when they see others' success in life. This other could be a colleague or boss. What the former do is to think of wicked ways to defame the latter or cast aspersions on the veracity of their qualifications and credentials. Those people who intentionally carry out this scandalous and mischievous work are sarcastically referred to in the Arab world as '**GOOD DOERS**'.

Those vicious persons, blinded by their hatred or grudge for others' success, and may be by others' assessment and evaluations reports in cases where the successful persons are in responsibility positions; tire themselves out by searching for ways to harm the fair, transparent and decent other, without lending any due consideration to the pain and agony such actions cause to the victimized person. Their aim, in Olsson's (2012, p. 149), "is nothing other than character assassination."

3. The Story

This story unfolded about 14 years ago when I was the dean of the College of English Language and Translation in a private university in the Gulf region. In the year 2001, the college needed to hire one adjunct faculty to teach English language skills courses. At that time we only found one person with a Ph. D. degree from a very well known UK-based university. We hired him for one semester as a visiting faculty. Half way through the semester, the deputy dean presented to me some samples of this person's exams and quizzes for the courses he was assigned to teach. They were full of spelling and structural errors, to the extent that



we started to doubt that this person had the qualification he claimed to have at that time.

Due to several considerations related to the university's and college's reputation, a decision was made to end the services of this person at the end of the semester. This decision was communicated to the person without giving any justification except that the university and college would not need any adjunct faculty in the coming semester because of the limited number of courses to be offered.

4. Repercussions

The deputy dean and I thought everything went well, and that we managed to cover things up and get rid of a person who might have had a phony degree. Nevertheless, a strange story started unfolding about me in the university without my knowledge. One day, I was summoned into the office of the University's Provost for Academic and Cultural Affairs. He asked me this very strange question: "Dr. Tharwat: Do you have a doctorate degree? I was very much shocked, astonished, anguished, and angrily replied with : No!. Being a close friend of me, he seriously said: "I want to check whether you have a Ph.D. degree or not?" Then, I started to realize that I had to be serious. I said to him: "why are you asking me this question?" He replied: "I have been to HR office to look for your certificates, but could not find them." I asked: "why are you doing this?" Still he would not tell me what was going on until I showed him the original certificate I had kept in my office! He took the certificate and ran to the University's President's office. Later on the same day, he brought the certificates back to me without uttering one word!

All this happened without my knowing what was going on about me and my qualifications until I demanded a full explanation from him. He wanted to end the story there, but I insisted on knowing why all that fuss was made. Then, he asked me to accompany him to his office and showed me a paper faxed (see appendix) to the university's president office.

5. The Role of Forensic Linguistics

From a first glimpse at the fax, I was able to detect some discrepancies in the content. But before I go into these, I would like to note here that the content was written on the UK University's letterhead paper. It seems that the person who faxed the text did his search and managed to know the name of the university I obtained my degree from, and somehow managed to get their letterhead paper with the university's logo and type the poisonous message on it. This, it seems, made the Gulf-based University's administration not think outside the box! That is, they were taken in the content and believed it, without questioning its veracity and, therefore; asked to see my original certificates. Had they told me about what was going on and showed me the fax sent to them when they first received it, I would have presented them with my original certificate, and the whole issue would have been, most probably, stifled and killed there!

6. What would have happened if the basics of forensic linguistics were applied to the message sent to my employer?

One of the main areas of forensic linguistics is the analysis of texts to determine their authorship (for more details on the areas of forensic linguistics, the reader is referred to Coulthard, 2007 and 2010; Coulthard & Johnson, 2007 and Grant, 2008). In this endeavor, forensic linguists subject disputed documents to careful and close scrutiny in terms of their style, grammatical structures, lexis, semantics, pragmatics, and a host of other linguistic features. In our case, the language of the text and its layout are compared and contrasted against the expected language level and formality of the sender's institution, guided by the intertextuality principle. According to Moloji and Bojabotseha (2014), Fairclough (1992, p. 102; 1993, p. 137, respectively) points out that texts are inherently intertextual. That is, "texts are constituted of elements of other texts (Moloji and Bojabotseha, 2014, p. 417)."



The text under investigation here is purportedly sent by a prestigious academic institution that is expected to adhere to a very formal and standard type of the English language. If we keep this in mind while doing what Olsson (2004) terms as “single text inquiries” and “authorship profiling”, we would come to the conclusions reported below.

7. Interaction with the Provost

The provost for Academic and Cultural Affairs himself was a Ph.D. holder in linguistics from a renowned UK university. When I first saw the message, I spotted some clues pointing to its phoniness and tried to highlight them to him, but he would not listen to me; he only wanted and insisted on seeing my original certificates. Had he listened to me, he, with his linguistic background, would have been able to realize that the message was a production of human ingenuity for the following reasons:

1. The faxed text did not contain a date,
2. Had it been genuine, it would have been directly addressed to the same person who, as claimed in the body of the text itself, initiated the first communication with the sender’s university and not to an unknown recipient as indicated in the phrase “To whom it may concern”,
3. The text would have contained a reference number and reference to the details of the previous communication from my employer,
4. The faxed paper would contain the sender’s telephone and fax numbers and all other necessary contact details,
5. The fax would contain a subject line stating the issue covered in the body of the text,
6. The message would start with a specific reference to the inquirer’s requested details/information,
7. The use of the name of the university sending the fax would have been more suitable than using first-person speaker/writer pronoun “I” at the beginning of the text. A more suitable and formal way of starting the text

would have been: ‘The University of X categorically states that Y....’,

8. The sender university would not write: “The name given (Tharwat Elsakran) has not graduated from the university named above.” Most probably, it would say: According to our records, Mr. X has not studied at this university, or is not one of its graduates,
9. The second sentence is a mere repetition of the same semantic content given in the first one. Furthermore, if a university was asked whether X person was one of its graduates or not, it would not have volunteered extra information and casted value judgment on the person’s qualification as noted at the end of sentence two.
10. The text does not contain any statement to close the communication, except the person’s name, official institutional title and signature,
11. The text is purportedly issued by the university’s registrar, but signed by the director of education,
12. More surprisingly, the name of the sender university does not match the university I got my degree from; I completed my degree at another campus of the same university, and
13. The person who sent and signed the letter discontinued working for this university a long time before the letter was sent.

All these features confirm that the author of the message sent cannot be the UK university. Although I knew the original culprit, no attempt was made to bring him into justice because the Gulf-based university wanted to put an end to the story. Now, more such cases are possible due to greater anonymity in online communication (Crystal, 2007; Michell, 2013). That is exactly what has prompted me to share this unforgettable experience with a wider audience so that they may know how to act and what to do in such situations.



8. Conclusion

Regardless of all the above, the Provost still insisted on viewing my original certificate; something that I readily did. I also went further and sent a copy of the document to the academic registrar of the UK-based university and requested him to respond. I also contacted my Ph.D. supervisor and got him involved in the issue; I asked him to follow up with the registrar to speed up things. Because of the unavailability of email these days, after two weeks I received a formal letter on the university's letterhead, signed by the academic registrar and carrying the university's stamp categorically stating that I was awarded the Ph.D. degree of this university. I took the letter and showed it to the Provost, who could not look me in the eye. I think he should have acted more carefully and verified things before he came to me. Defaming people's reputation is not an easy thing to restore.

Here, I would like to end this story by posing the following questions:

1. Why did not the provost, being a trained linguist with a Ph.D. from a reputable UK university, use his knowledge of the English language and decide the veracity of the faxed document?
2. Who would compensate me for the psychological torture and pain I was made to go through? An important issue that victimized persons normally experience.

Consequently, forensic linguists may want to add to the study of forensic linguistics another important dimension of their work- the mental pain and sufferings inflicted on innocent person(s) whose qualifications or publications are doubted or questioned as a result of the work of **GOOD DOERS**, whose intent is to harm and cause damage without being caught because they remain anonymous as it is the case here! There is evidence that interpreters experience negative emotional and psychological effects as a results of interpreting for people who have been through torture, rape, etc. Does this make us assume that forensic linguists may go through similar experiences as a result of the

heavy burden they carry on their shoulders to prove the innocence of someone, or the failures they may, sometimes, experience? For instance, how did Prof. Svartik feel after Timothy Evans was thought to be wrongly killed? And how did Professor Coulthard feel after 45 years of wrongly hanging Derek Bently for his part in the murder of a policeman? There is also a need in today's virtual world, especially in the Arab world where little is known about forensic linguistics, to introduce courses on the topic and educate the public on how this science can be used in revealing the nature of many of the texts and email messages that numberless people receive as being from official sources. Sarwar (2012) rightly argues that today's virtual world calls for offering forensic linguistics courses in developing countries.

9. References

- Coulthard, M. (2010). *The Routledge handbook of forensic linguistic*. Routledge, London and New York: Routledge.
- Coulthard, M. & Johnson, A. (2007). An introduction to forensic linguistics: *Language in evidence*. Routledge. London and New York: Routledge.
- Crystal, D. (2007). *Language and the internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. 1993. Critical discourse analysis and the marketisation of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse and Society*, 4:133-168.
- Gibbons, J. (2003). *Forensic linguistics: An introduction to language in the justice system*. USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Grant, T. D.(2008). *Approaching questions in forensic authorship analysis*. In *Dimensions of forensic linguistics*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Pages: 215-229.
- Michell, C. S. (2013). *Investigating the use of forensic stylistic and stylometric techniques in the analyses of authorship on a publicly accessible social networking*



- site (facebook). Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis. University of South Africa: South Africa.
- Moloi, K. C. & Bojabotseha T. P. (2014). A critical discourse analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the African National Congress (ANC). *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3(4), 417-423.
- Olsson, J. (2004). *Forensic linguistics: An Introduction to Language, Crime, and the Law* London: Continuum.
- Olsson, J. (2012). *Wordcrime: Solving crime through forensic linguistics*. Continuum International Publishing Group: London.
- Sarwar, A. (2012). Forensic linguistics: What and how. *International Conference on Education and e-Learning (EeL) Conference Proceedings* (pp.158-163). Singapore: Global Science and Technology Forum.
- Toolan, M. (2009). *Forensic linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Valero-Garcés, C. (2005). Emotional and psychological effects on interpreters in public services: A critical factor to bear in mind. *Translation Journal*, 9(3).

Appendix¹

University Logo & Name

University of X

Registrar

Y UNIVERSITY

GENERAL DIRECTOR

Dear Sir, Madam;

To whom it may concern,

I would like to inform you that the name given (Tharwat ElSakran) has not graduated from the University named above. His name is not included in our registration and his certificate is fabricated and has no foundation.

Yours sincerely

Director of Education

Signature

Professor (name of Professor)

¹Names of universities and logos are not included for confidentiality.